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LECTURE IN MILWAUKEE

MICHIGAN MIDWEST POLITICAL SCIENCE

[1] The distinction between theory and empirical research might be understood to mean that theory is not empirical, a priori. This understanding is not necessary. Theory may be based on broad, constant, uncontested experience, and consist of reflections on such experience. Theory may be the attempt to discover the fundamental reasons why political things have certain broad characteristics attested by experience anywhere, e.g., the crude classification of forms of government into rule of one, rule of a few, and rule of the many may be said to owe its stringency to logic; but it would have been discarded immediately as irrelevant if experience had not shown that the three forms are politically possible since they are actual.

The necessity of theory is today generally admitted, I believe. All empirical research is based on theory. Empirical studies in group politics derive their inspiration from Bentley's *The Process of Government*, a theoretical work.⁶ Self-contained empirical research is a fiction. The question concerns then not the necessity of theory as such but the kind of theory. What distinguishes good theory from bad theory? Good theory is theory that makes possible empirical research. This is true but not sufficient. Not merely exactness, but relevance as well is needed. Good theory must point to relevant problems. It must not exclude a priori any relevant aspects of political life. It must not be of such a nature as to force us to overlook the wood for the trees. Relevance is not guaranteed by scientific method but by comprehensive grasp of the subject matter, by breadth, discernment, and perceptiveness.

I have read Mr. Schubert's paper. I notice within a certain distrust of the particular kind of theory, "ethical theory," or "natural law theory." I fully share this distrust to the extent to which he has in mind such theories as prevent a student of politics from seeing relevant political facts, e.g., theories which

⁶Arthur F. Bentley, *The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1908).

suggest that only virtuous men are elected to office whereas vicious men invariably go to jail or to the gallows. These theories are as unrealistic as theories which suggest that virtue—great qualities of the mind and heart—never play a role in life. But I cannot agree with Mr. Schubert on every point. He says on page 51:

Most of the positivists agree upon one point: administrators and judges are unimportant in the process which engulfs their individuality, and the public interest is a product of the process. For the natural law theorist, on the other hand, the public interest is a thing of importance, independent of the decisional process and absolute in its terms. The public official excogitates the true essence of the public interest by means of a mental act of extra-sensory perception.⁷

[2] I do not believe that this distinction is complete; the public interest is, I think, the product of a process which includes sensory and nonsensory functions located in judges and administrators or else the public interest is excogitated by means of extrasensory perception. Let us take some simple examples. The student of politics perceives by means of sensory perception that people are campaigning for pure food; on the other hand, neither he nor anyone else has any sensory perception of public campaigns for contaminated food. On the basis of these sensory perceptions or the absence of them he develops the hypothesis that a public campaign for contaminated food cannot in reason be expected. Not being a babe in the woods he knows that there are or may be interest groups which derive profit from selling contaminated food. But these people cannot dare to avow this fact. Since he has not yet encountered any difficulty in this interplay of sensory perception and reflection he becomes sufficiently bold to generalize and to make the daring hypothesis that there are maybe a considerable number of objectives of groups or of individuals which cannot be publicly avowed or which are not publicly defensible, e.g., he suspects that it would not be publicly defensible to suggest that the United States immigration laws should be made not in Washington but by some international authority, say in Geneva. He then begins to wonder whether the broad overall objectives which are publicly defensible are not identical with those things which are generally regarded as a most massive and most enduring part of the public interest. He finds that there are certain things which are generally regarded as national disasters, and he finds this without any recourse to extrasensory perception: civil war, widespread juvenile delinquency, epidemics, large-scale unemployment, runaway inflation, severe setbacks in foreign politics, not to speak of military disasters. Making some effort at a sympathetic understanding of ordinary folk, he may even realize that these generally held views are not irrational. Having thus understood what people mean when they speak of public

⁷See Schubert, "'The Public Interest' in Administrative Decision-Making: Theorem, Theosophy, or Theory?," 367.

interest he realizes that this crude yardstick is, of course, insufficient for establishing definitely what specific measures will be conducive to the public interest at a given time—that in order to establish this, much experience and considerable expert knowledge may be required and that with all experience and all expert knowledge, many measures will still remain controversial and may be decided by such irrelevancies as pressure groups and antiquated notions. Still he cannot help noticing that if he does not keep in mind this crude yardstick he cannot understand what political people are aiming at or at least cannot afford completely to forget because there may be a reckoning sooner or later. If his sensory experience extends to such things as a policy of the British Labour Party in the early 1930s, he will become aware of the fact that impending national disasters and their obvious means for preventing them from happening are not always foreseen by all people and, therefore, in particular they may not be foreseen by judges and administrators. The disarmament of the United States in 1945 may have been the only policy acceptable not only to judges and administrators but to the large majority of the American people; this does not mean, obviously, that that measure was to the interest of the American people. [3] He will be driven to the conclusion that the proposition, “the public interest is a product of a process,” may be in agreement with a certain a priori theory but is not supported by simple experience. This being the case it is by no means impossible that from time to time a human being may become concerned with the public interest not only in speech but in deed. If he will consider such an objective as prison reform, he will find people who are seriously concerned with prison reform for no other reason accessible to sensory perception except that they wonder whether it would not be better for everyone concerned if the prisons were used for the purpose of rehabilitating the inmates. These people do not have to be particularly unselfish; it is sufficient if they are able to argue from this analogy: just as a man in his senses who has to live with dogs would prefer the dogs not to be vicious to him, in the same way a man in his senses who has to live with human beings would prefer the greatest convenient diminution of malice and viciousness in his society.⁸ Our social scientist might come to feel that it is not necessary to refer to a special group-interest in order to understand such a desire. He will be able to see that the conclusion, “There is no public interest,” does not follow from the premise, “There is almost always controversy as to which measures are conducive here and now to the public interest.” He will be able to see that the existence of murderers, e.g., does not prove the nonexistence of the public interest. For even if it were true that all murderers wish that murder is not to

⁸See Plato, *Apology of Socrates* 25c5–26b2. Strauss’s reference to dogs rather than to horses might be significant. See Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Virtue Is Knowledge: The Moral Foundations of Socratic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 26.

be regarded as a punishable action whereas they may only wish that their own murders should remain unpunished, it would be most important that a move in this direction would not have the slightest chance of finding public support—for the simple reason that no possible cause whatever can be made for the proposition that society would be better off if murder would go unpunished. Finally he would begin to wonder whether the reasoning maintained to support the rejection of the notion of public interest, is not fatal also to the notion of group interests; for he will find out by sensory perception that there is disagreement even in groups, even in married couples, as to which measures are conducive to the group interest. Are there never any members of corporations or labor unions whose loyalty to their group is not above suspicion? What is good for the goose public interest would seem to be good for the gander group interest.⁹

I have been attempting to show that the question regarding the notion of public interest is controversial not only among positivists and natural law theorists but also between positivists and what we may call political realists. No one would regard Machiavelli as a natural law theorist. He, and not Bentley, and not even Karl Marx, originated the alternative to natural law theory. Yet Machiavelli found out by his sensory experience, which included of course a considerable amount of historical knowledge, and above all by his practical experience that there is such a thing as a common good, the good of society at large, in spite of the fact that society consists of antagonistic groups.¹⁰ Such crude, massive objectives as independence of foreign domination, law and order (or a minimum of arbitrary use of violence by government), prosperity, glory are generally accepted popular things. These objectives are not always actively pursued; society may be unaware of [4] them or they may have despaired of ever getting them, or, despising life in this world on religious grounds, they may despise politics all together. But to put it crudely, literate societies which take politics seriously take the objectives mentioned seriously. Awareness of these objectives is, of course, insufficient for solving the problem of which specific measures are conducive to those objectives here and now; but this very problem could not even exist as a problem without the previous assumption of the overall objectives mentioned. Nor does awareness of those objectives settle the question of precedence in case of conflict. But one cannot make an intelligent concession to necessity or intelligent compromise if one does not know what one sacrifices and why one sacrifices it.

The issue is, then, not exclusively and even primarily the one which is pending between positivists and natural law theorists. The primary issue is that between chief preoccupation with the scientific method and chief

⁹See Strauss, "An Epilogue," 219.

¹⁰See Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), esp. 28, 84, 86, 235.

preoccupation with subject matter. The primary objection to positivism is not that it deprives the moral distinctions of their significance and dignity. The primary objection to positivism is that while it is concerned with exactness it is insufficiently concerned with relevance. There is a considerable disproportion between the methodological effort and the investment of time and money on the one hand and the results on the other. I take as an example Berelson's *Voting*, an admirable book.¹¹ In the last chapter he discusses the political relevance of his findings for the understanding of democracy. All findings relevant for this question are shown by Berelson to have been familiar to Lord Bryce, Lord Lindsay, and others; to arrive at the important findings, there was no need for the tremendous effort. The usual answer to this kind of criticism is this, "Prior to exact quantitative studies, we did not really know—we merely guessed." This answer is based on the premise that only scientific knowledge is genuine knowledge. I shall not go into the question whether the allegedly scientific findings are really more alive than what very intelligent men of past and varied experience know from their observation, and through their judgment. I limit myself to questioning the fundamental premise: that prescientific knowledge has to be discarded as prejudice or folklore.¹² Over against this I contend that scientific social science stands and falls by constant reliance on prescientific knowledge, and that prescientific knowledge does not alter its character a bit in the process of scientific study. The scientific social scientist who studies the presidential elections of 1948 and 1952 starts from the premise that there were presidential elections in these years and that a person was elected president, i.e., an official having varying functions, power, etc. His knowledge of these trivial things is a basic assumption of his study; it is in no way different in its cognitive character from what everyone else knows about these things and it remains unaffected by any scientific social science inquiries. All social sciences have to do with "people"; how to tell people, i.e., human beings, from other beings is presupposed by social science. We may also say that scientific social science is based on the premise that macroscopic knowledge of things political, the knowledge possessed by the intelligent and informed citizens or statesmen, [5] is in need of being rewritten as it were in the light of microscopic or maybe telescopic knowledge of things political. The alternative to this is a view that any possible refinements achieved by microscopic or telescopic techniques have to be rewritten into the macroscopic language of the citizen in order to make sense or reveal their possible meaning.¹³ There is a connection between the relative unconcern with relevance and the contempt

¹¹The reference is to Bernard Berelson, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

¹²See Leo Strauss, "What Is Political Philosophy?," in *What Is Political Philosophy? and Other Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 23.

¹³For "macroscopic," "microscopic," and "telescopic," see Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), x.

for prescientific knowledge. Prescientific knowledge of political matters implies a distinction between the important and the unimportant; it therefore draws our attention to the important, the politically important. It guides us towards selection, the reasoned selection, of worthwhile themes of research. We can also say that prescientific knowledge of things political is the only guarantee against the danger that we overlook the wood for the trees. Scientific studies are in danger of favoring concentration on partial, and perhaps, minute phenomena, while making us lose sight of the context, the whole within which they occur: e.g., in studying primary groups one may easily minimize the fact that one never studies primary groups simply; one studies in fact primary groups in mid-twentieth-century USA, or, more generally, primary groups in a democratic society of a certain kind. If the whole within which the particular phenomena occur is not grasped clearly one is bound to misinterpret the particular phenomena. Positivism cannot completely overlook the whole. But it is compelled to minimize it by speaking of "habitual background" or "widely shared but unorganized interests";¹⁴ it literally relegates the whole, from which all parts derive their meaning, into the background.

All observable social facts occur within a context or a whole, belong to it, or depend on it. This context or whole is frequently called "society." But since there are various kinds of societies within a society, people are compelled to speak of the "whole society" in order to distinguish it from the partial societies. The meaning of the "whole society" becomes somewhat clearer if we note that one "whole society" is separate from another "whole society" by borders and that barriers owe their origins to wars or equivalents of wars, i.e., to emphatically political action. For reasons like this it is preferable to speak of the country rather than society. The country as human phenomenon has necessarily a certain order, i.e., a certain distinction between high and low in regard to both human qualities and persons. There is no good term for this, for the countries as ordered in the sense indicated, in any language known to me excepting Greek. The Greek term *politeia*, usually translated by "constitution," actually means that which gives a country, or a city, its order, character, or life.

The conception of the regime antedates the distinction between the political and the sociological.¹⁵ It counteracts both the tendency to minimize the life of the communities in favor of legal institutions as well as a tendency to minimize the importance of the legal order. It would seem that the more or less passionate attack on traditional political science which we are witnessing today is due to the following fact: owing to a fundamental change in political

¹⁴The references are, respectively, to Bentley, *Process of Government*, 218; and David Truman, *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion* (New York: Knopf, 1951), 486.

¹⁵See Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 30.

theory, political science has come to view the legal institution in relative isolation; [6] a certain narrowing of the horizon has taken place; one expected to counteract this by drawing more and more on insights peculiar to sociology. Thus the fight that is still going on is a fight against a certain type of political theory. It is easy to see, e.g., that the prevalent emphasis on group politics derives its force from the neglected groups, which was due to the notion that the political phenomena have to be accounted for by the interplay of the state of the social whole on the one hand, and the mass of homogenous individuals on the other. In other words, the present state of discussion is a consequence of the fact that the concept of regime had become more or less forgotten, and that it had been replaced by the concept of the general will.

The general will as a will of society is necessarily directed towards the good of society or to the common good or the public interest (the general will cannot err);¹⁶ hence, the general will takes the place of the public interest; whatever sovereign people declare to be the public interest, must be accepted as the public interest. The general will is in fact the will of the majority. The majority may delegate various powers to various organizations; the end of the story is Mr. Schubert's definition of public interest.

The Unpublished Passage of "An Epilogue"¹⁷

[1] Let us try to state the first impression which an altogether uninitiated and innocent but otherwise properly qualified youth is likely to receive from the new political science. The world conjured by the new political science will appear to him to be no less fantastic although much less charming than the world of the Arabian Nights. In a way it is the same as the world with which he is familiar but it now appears to be overlaid by a sort of fog or rather smog. The new political scientists obviously intend to speak about human beings and human affairs and even to speak about them if not humanely at any rate as humanitarians. But for some reason they speak about their theme—the concern of feeling and generous hearts—in a repulsive, not to say inhuman way which one could not call barbarian without doing great injustice to the barbarians proper. Recoiling from such an outburst, we would tell our young friend that the world of politics is not simply the world of feeling and liberal hearts but very frequently the world of cold calculators, hot and yelling demagogues, harsh tyrants, smooth operators, hard-boiled businessmen, and tough labor bosses. But he will scold us

¹⁶See Leo Strauss, "The Three Waves of Modernity," in *An Introduction to Political Philosophy: Ten Essays*, ed. Hilail Gildin (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 91.

¹⁷The manuscript has no title. In blue pencil on the right-hand side of the manuscript it is written "originally intended for Epilogue." The phrase is not in Strauss's handwriting.

for our lack of perceptivity, for our not seeing the difference between the language used by those types and the language of the new political science: however indelicate the former may be, it may be refreshing, for those types frequently call a spade a spade. Or remembering from his extracurricular readings the classic of the tough realism which sees nothing but hard and harsh facts, he will be disgusted at us for our being obtuse to the massive difference between Machiavelli and his present-day followers. Whereas Machiavelli, he will say, was graceful, subtle, and colorful, the teaching of his present-day followers is graceless, gross, and drab; whereas Machiavelli's new political [2] science required a very great effort on the part of select readers after he was dead, the contemporary new political science can be had by every contemporary for the asking. As for drabness, the new political science conveys the impression and sometimes it explicitly teaches that there is nothing to get excited about: there are only differences of degree, not of kind; there are no either/or's, no "grand alternatives" like tyranny and freedom. The radicalism of the either/or is not only unwise or inhuman but simply impossible: all social action is inevitably gradual. There never was a revolution strictly speaking—a burning of what one has worshiped and a worshiping of what one has burned. Not red and black, or red and white, or black and white but grey is the color of political life and indeed of everything. Machiavelli's grand cynicism has transformed itself into a drab cynicism: the cynicism of Cesare Borgia into the cynicism of a madam. His angry disgust barely permits our youth to permit us to draw his attention to the liberal and hence altogether uncynical inspiration of the new political science. He proves to have anticipated our objection. He boldly asserts that the new political science, obsessed with the desire to level all important differences, cannot even maintain the grand alternative by which it itself is constituted, the alternative of tough realism vs. soft idealism or of smooth gradualism vs. rugged radicalism: by admitting and even proclaiming the power or right of "values" of every kind, it readmits every kind of radicalism as well as of sentimentality into the political arena. Not only does the new political scientist allow for the power of liberal impulses in political man; he himself is not immune to them. He may pose as a tough-minded social engineer who thinks of nothing but the quickest and cheapest solution to [3] any social problem; claiming that this is part of the cheapness, he seeks for solutions which involve the least human suffering; in fact, the overall objective is what he calls a dynamic society in which the maximum of dynamism goes together with the minimum of suffering. For having identified suffering with dissatisfaction, he does no longer demand the abolition of suffering, lest the social mechanism which is fed by wants come to a standstill. Our ward insists on calling this effort sentimental and not humane because it stems from forgetting the fact that man has not merely the duty to mitigate sufferings. He refers us to such practitioners of the political art as Burke and Churchill: Burke spoke with contempt of the humanitarians who recognize only the liberal virtues and reject the severe and restrictive virtues; and Churchill's highest political maxim binds together the unwillingness to inflict unnecessary woe with a fidelity to covenants and

the honor of soldiers. The new political scientists do not admire and foster the restrictive and the heroic virtues; they try to "debunk" them. This action extends to the intellectual heroes as well. They despise the thought of the past in the act of admitting that some of the great thinkers of the past had remarkable "hunches." Yet it is not given to man to live out his life without admiring some men; hence the new political scientists replace the respect for what was greatest in the past by mutual admiration of their publications. This admiration, which in their opinion derives from their admiration of science, does not induce them to recognize the exalted status of man, the only mechanism or organism capable of science: rationality is the preserve of the scientific observer or engineer; the observed or manipulated man is rational only in the sense that he "rationalizes," and thus blurs, what drives him or makes him run. Since scientific man cannot be essentially different from nonscientific man—[4] for there is not even an essential difference between man and the brutes—rationality in every sense proves to be wholly baseless or unintelligible. Taking all these features of the world of the new political science together, our angry young man will be at a complete loss to understand as to how this world can be attractive or of any interest to anyone. Hence he will become interested not indeed in that world, not in the teaching of its creators, but in these creators themselves. While shouting that none of them will be remembered, let alone be read, after he has departed this world, nay, after he has retired, he will nevertheless say of them what Nietzsche had said of their illustrious ancestors: they, in contradistinction to their publications, are interesting; they wrongly claim to be the subjects who adequately analyze political or social things but they can rightly be described as worthy objects of political or social analysis: they are as characteristic a segment of present-day culture as the reducers or creators of present-day popular culture in the narrow sense of the expression.